

REVIEW: *THE PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY OF NYAGRONG MINYAG, AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE OF WESTERN CHINA* BY JOHN R VAN WAY

Reviewed by Sami Honkasalo (University of Helsinki)



John R Van Way. 2018. *The Phonetics and Phonology of Nyagrong Minyag, an Endangered Language of Western China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Doctoral dissertation, xiv, 137 p [ <https://bit.ly/2PpCV7Z>, accessed 25 September 2018].

John Van Way's dissertation, *The Phonetics and Phonology of Nyagrong Minyag, an Endangered Language of Western China* provides a compact, yet in-depth description of the sound system of Nyagrong Minyag, a Gyalrongic Horpa language of the Trans-Himalayan (Tibeto-Burman, Sino-Tibetan) language family spoken by ethnic Tibetans in western Sichuan, China. In diachronic research of Trans-Himalayan, the Gyalrongic languages are estimated to play a role comparable to that of Sanskrit in Indo-European studies (Jacques 2017:588). The Horpa languages, however, have only recently garnered more of the attention that they deserve. Van Way's dissertation forms a part of this ongoing new wave of Horpa research and constitutes a welcome addition in shedding more light on these languages, many of which are currently becoming endangered (see e.g., Tunzhi 2017 for the state of Stau).

Reflecting the current focus on collaboration and bidirectionality between the researcher and the language community, the dissertation forms a part of a larger partnership project in which the author and community members work towards language preservation. The present work focusing on phonetics and phonology

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begins with an introduction (1-15) and methodology (16-30). This is followed by an overview of the phonemic system (31-55) and a chapter dedicated to syllables, phonotactics, and related phonological processes (56-74). Nyagrong Minyag exhibits the typologically rare phenomena of aspirated fricatives and uvularized vowels. Consequently, the author dedicates two separate chapters to the phenomena of frication (75-91) and uvularization (92-127). The conclusion (128-131) both summarizes the central findings of the dissertation and highlights remaining questions that can primarily be addressed by working with more consultants and through new experiments in future research.

Glossonyms have been a problematic aspect of Trans-Himalayan research (Thurgood 2003:4). Horpa studies are currently moving from often pejorative or meaningless exonyms into glossonyms preferred and identifiable by the speaker communities (see Thunzhi 2017 for an argument for "rTa'u" in lieu of other alternatives for the variety of Central Horpa spoken primarily in rTa'u/Daofu County). Against this backdrop, the author chooses the term Nyagrong Minyag for the focus language. As mere Minyag (Muya), could easily be confused with the separate Minyag language, the adopted term that also combines the toponym Nyagrong likely constitutes the best option for future reference to this language in linguistic literature. When discussing the macro-level genealogical affiliation of Nyagrong Minyag, the author opts for the term Sino-Tibetan that has come under increasing debate in recent years (van Driem 2008, Owen-Smith and Hill 2014).

China is moving towards a widespread loss of languages, especially in the Tibetosphere (Roche 2017:24). Nyagrong Minyag exemplifies the current situation and appears highly vulnerable. The whole language community of approximately 1,000 speakers will be relocated due to the construction of a dam for a hydroelectric project. This will surely lead to disruption of language transmission. Since all Nyagrong Minyag speakers are bilingual in the local prestige language, Nyagskad, even a minor relocation in the region will accelerate a language shift among Nyagrong Minyag speakers. Viewed against this

backdrop, Van Way's description is very timely and a valuable permanent record of an extremely vulnerable language.

Regrettably, phonological descriptions of endangered languages have often been based on few sources that, not infrequently, are limited to a single speaker. Aware of this trend, Ladefoged (2003:14-15) advises a fieldworker to ideally record half a dozen speakers from both sexes to accurately reveal the phonetic characteristics of a language. For the main word list, Van Way uses recordings from seven female and thirteen male speakers, setting a high standard for fieldwork practices. Due to outsiders' limited access to the speech community in a politically sensitive area, the author collected the source materials through a visiting native collaborator. This imposed certain limitations on the work, e.g., the nature of the recordings.

Van Way reports on the difficulty of recording lexical items in carrier frames minimizing list intonation and other effects distorting suprasegmental features, such as intonation, resulting in excluding these phonological topics in the present work. Pitch and tonal phenomena play a crucial role in understanding the diachrony of Horpa languages. Also, while Sun (to appear) describes Nyagrong Minyag as a tonal language, Van Way finds no evidence for contrastive phonemic tone. Suprasegmental features thus remain to be researched in more detail in future Nyagrong Minyag scholarship.

With forty-two phonemic consonants and seven phonemic vowels, Nyagrong Minyag phonology closely aligns with previous phonological work on Horpa languages (see Vanderveen 2015 for Stau). In addition to minimal pair and near minimal pair sets, the author uses palatograms and linguograms together to provide further evidence for the phonological interpretation, greatly corroborating his arguments. As a result, Van Way's description is likely the most detailed phonological analysis of any Gyalrongic language at present. In addition to figure 3.1.3. illustrating the density plots of midpoints of vowels with normalization, a vowel table with frequencies listed could also have been included in the work. Of the vowels /i, y, u, ə, ε, ɔ, a/, /y/ has by far the lowest frequency and thus is of particular interest.

Based on figure 3.1.3., it seems that the phoneme could be rather interpreted as central, yet from the viewpoint of central phoneme ratios (Crothers 1978), the resulting system would be typologically rarer. Also, Van Way finds no vowel harmony in Nyagrong Minyag, a feature proposed to exist in Stau (Gates 2017 *passim*), but playing only a limited role in Geshiza (personal fieldwork).

Complex consonant clusters characterize many Gyalrongic languages, and Nyagrong Minyag neatly reflects this tendency. In its syllable structure, the language exhibits the maximal form CCCCVCV. Established terms 'preinitial', and 'initial' are used in the work in their special meanings in Gyalrongic studies. While two-member consonant clusters are treated exhaustively, discussion on other cluster types remains at the level of illustrations. Discovering and listing all consonant clusters will undoubtedly remain a challenging task in the documentation of Horpa languages, not least because some combinations appear only in "phonological hapax legomena" of a single lexical item, often in an obscure semantic domain facing the risk of oblivion. Consequently, new clusters are occasionally discovered even in better known Gyalrongic languages. Nevertheless, as Lai (2017:56-79) illustrates in the context of Wobzi Khroskyabs, instances of complex clusters have many underlying restrictions and also frequently result from derivation, which makes the daunting task of their mapping more reasonable in the future.

In clustered environments, Nyagrong Minyag nasals assimilate regressively into the following consonant. Van Way, however, discovers exceptions to this general tendency, for instance [mʈʂʰi] 'snake', [mɔdzɔ] 'saliva'. For these instances an underlying form with two pre-initial consonants are proposed, one labiodental and one nasal: /fntʂʰi/ and /fndzɔ/. The two preinitial consonants consequently mutate into a single surface form. While this hypothesis adequately describes the synchronic, language-internal phonology of Nyagrong Minyag, an alternative explanation for the phenomenon is also possible in light of comparative Horpa data. In Geshiza, a related Horpa language, two distinct nasal preinitials exist. In addition to an archiphonemic abstract nasal preinitial *N-* that assimilates

regressively into the following consonant, the language also has a preinitial *m*- that retains its place of articulation without assimilation under all circumstances: *mp<sup>h</sup>ri* 'snake', *mdzə(rji)* 'saliva'. Seen from a comparative perspective, it can be alternatively hypothesized that the aberrant Nyagrong Minyag instances reflect a historical preinitial type that is disappearing from the phonotactic system of the language.

In addition to aspirational contrasts in plosives, Nyagrong Minyag also has three aspirated fricatives: /s<sup>h</sup>, ʃ<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>/. These sounds are typologically rare; for instance, based on an initial survey, Craioveanu (2013) found that aspirated fricatives appear in only two to three percent of the world's languages. Importantly, Van Way observes that aspirated fricatives exhibit a trend of slightly lower overall pitch. From a diachronic viewpoint, this provides valuable material for analyzing the interconnectedness of tone, aspiration, and phonation type in Horpa languages.

In conclusion, Van Way's dissertation on Nyagrong Minyag constitutes a contribution with lasting value. In addition to linguists working with Tran-Himalayan languages, it is recommended for researchers with phonological, phonetic, and typological orientations. It is hoped that this initial step in Nyagrong Minyag will be complemented by materials describing and analyzing other aspects of the language, for the benefit of both the language and research communities.

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